

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TANTRIC YOGA Part I: THE ESSENCE OF TANTRA with SWAMI



CHETANANANDA

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we are going to explore "The Philosophy of Tantric Yoga." With me is Swami Chetanananda, who is the founder of the Nityananda Institute in Portland, Oregon. Swamiji is a direct disciple of Swami Rudrananda of New York, who himself was a disciple of Swami Nityananda of Ganeshpuri. Swami Nityananda is the source of the modern Siddha yoga tradition in the United States. Swami Chetanananda is the author of a number of books, including *The Logic of Love*, *Dynamic Stillness*, *The Breath of God*, and *Songs from the Center of the Well*. Welcome, Swamiji.

SWAMI CHETANANDA: Thank you, Jeffrey.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to be with you.

CHETANANANDA: Pleased to be here.

MISHLOVE: I think in talking about Tantric yoga and the philosophy of Tantric yoga, there are probably a number of misconceptions that would be useful to clarify at the beginning of our interview. I suppose one of the most obvious of these misconceptions is that Tantric yoga focuses primarily on sexual rituals of different types.

CHETANANANDA: Basically, Tantric yoga has almost nothing to do with sex of any kind, and I personally see it as a real tragedy that in this country we have emphasized that big misunderstanding, because it tends to draw people's attention toward the sensational and not toward the enormous potentiality that is present in the practice of Tantric yoga for human development and the expansion of individual awareness.

MISHLOVE: Tantric yoga is one of the earliest human traditions.

CHETANANANDA: There is evidence of Tantric yoga as far back as 4000 B.C. as a fully developed practice in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, which are Indus River Valley civilizations in north India, now in Pakistan. The very earliest of the written aspects of this tradition is the Magendra Tantra, which is perhaps at least -- the earliest manuscript is datable to the second century before Christ. So it is indeed a very ancient tradition. Since it was an oral tradition, by the way, the evolution of a literary tradition within it is considered to be the last phase of its development.

MISHLOVE: I think it might also be useful to point out that the Tantric tradition is one that is found both in Hinduism and in Buddhism.

CHETANANANDA: It is very interesting that Vajrayana and Shingon Buddhism are two very important Tantric traditions within Buddhism, and the Tantric tradition within Hinduism has both its what we call Shaiva, which is related to Shiva, and Vaishnava elements. So the Tantric tradition emerges within both Hindu and Buddhist culture, which are separate cultures -- close together, but still slightly separate. And the two elements of the Tantric tradition end up having much more in common with each other than they do with the original traditions from which they have come. So you have the Shaiva and Vaishnava Tantras being much closer to the Buddhist Tantric traditions than either Hinduism or Buddhism are to each other.

MISHLOVE: Now, we've sort of talked around Tantra quite a bit and established it historically, and pointed out that the sexual practices, while they exist within the Tantric tradition, are really a minor aspect of that tradition. What would be the essence of Tantra?

CHETANANANDA: Very simply put, the essence of Tantra is vital force.

MISHLOVE: Vital force.

CHETANANANDA: Vital force. One of the common terms you would understand that to be is kundalini. The essence of Tantra, then, is kundalini. But I translate that into a common English term. If I were going to say to my mother or my father, what does kundalini mean, I would say vital force is what it meant.

MISHLOVE: Kundalini is associated with a coiled serpent that resides at the base of the spine.

CHETANANANDA: Exactly right. Kundalini refers to this three-and-a-half-coiled serpent power that exists within a human being, and its awakening and its expansion is understood as the mechanism by which fulfillment, realization, liberation, salvation takes place. Now, those three coils that you referred to, I have further elaborated -- and this is traditional -- into the first coil being prana kundalini, which is essentially the energy that powers the fluctuation of the cerebrospinal fluid within the spinal column. Sometimes I refer to it, and other people have referred to it, as the breath of life. It is the fluctuation of this energy within the cerebrospinal fluid which is considered within the tradition to be the essence of the three-phase respiration process that powers your individual physiology. So prana kundalini is the source of individual physiology and all that goes with it -- you know, bodily functions, and movement within the experiential world.

MISHLOVE: In other words, the vital energy along the spinal column.

CHETANANANDA: Exactly right. That's prana kundalini. The second coil is called chitta kundalini, and that is the vital energy of mind. That is the power by which the senses take in energy or information and structure it within as personal history, and manifest from that personal history instincts and a world view -- chitta kundalini.

MISHLOVE: Chitta coming from the Sanskrit word for mindstuff.

CHETANANANDA: Mind. Exactly. And finally the highest level of kundalini, the third coil, is para kundalini, which is the universal vital force, essence of life itself -- the source from which all experience is derived.

MISHLOVE: The universal life force -- some kind of a cosmic force.

CHETANANANDA: Let's just say it is the energy that is the energy from which the whole cosmos has come forth. Interestingly, when we talk about universal life force, there is also another term that refers to that universal life force called sponda. Sponda means very, very, very, very subtle vibration. Now, it's interesting that back in I think the very early sixties, at Bell Labs in New Jersey, there was a discovery of a very subtle microwave vibration, very subtle, that was seen to be at the time equidistant throughout the whole universe. This very subtle vibration was the residue of the big bang, and the residual of the energy that the whole universe was congealed from.

MISHLOVE: That's right.

CHETANANANDA: So when we talk about universal life force, we are not really talking about energy that is different from material energy. We are only talking about it in the broadest possible sense, in which this universal energy has included in it the full range of frequencies that include matter, the most condensed form of energy, and the subtlest plasma field form of energy, which perhaps exists prior to any kind of movement that might take place.

MISHLOVE: So the whole range of physical energies.

CHETANANANDA: The whole range of physical energies, a much broader range than we are ordinarily in any way attuned to.

MISHLOVE: Now this is intriguing to me, because you've used the term matter, and matter is related to the same word from which we say mother; in fact the origin I think is Sanskrit. And one of the characteristics of the Tantric philosophy, as I've been educated to think of it, is that it has to do with the feminine aspect of things as well as the masculine.

CHETANANANDA: Culturally it's interesting to know that within the Tantric tradition, within the practice groups themselves, it is the only tradition that I have ever encountered, especially in all of Asia, in which men and women have an equal standing within the group. And in some texts -- actually at a certain point in time, the feminine aspect of the Tantras, the shakti aspect, becomes predominant, and Tantrism becomes equated with what's called shaktism, or the worship of the feminine. Some texts actually go so far as to say that to be initiated by a woman guru is a superior initiation. The worship of the feminine in this case has nothing to do with gender. Current ideas about goddess worship, which are contemporary ideas, and in some instances relate themselves back to the Tantric tradition, are erroneously connected, because basically in this case feminine refers to movement -- movement that gives rise to instability within the fundamental field of creative energy from which the whole universe comes forth. And this instability is the essence, the source of the exchange process, which gives rise to energy, interaction, condensation, matter, experience, form, etcetera.

MISHLOVE: Many people are probably familiar with Tantric art. Particularly, I suppose, in the Tibetan traditions you see the various male deities coupling with female deities, and that's an expression of the pulsing of the universe in some sense.

CHETANANANDA: I think that's true. That's exactly what it is -- the masculine always referring to stillness; the feminine always referring to movement, and the interaction of the two is in fact the very essence of all of experience. It's the essence of experience, that pulsation. You cannot have movement without stillness. You cannot have stillness without movement. The two things are totally, intimately linked.

MISHLOVE: On this point, I understand that Tantric yoga really has a different emphasis than the classical yoga system of Patanjali, which I think emphasizes only the stillness.

CHETANANANDA: Probably that's true. In this case that's why the whole shaktism within the Tantric tradition comes up, because in fact what they're emphasizing is exactly the opposite, and that is movement. So that the practice becomes the awareness of the pulsation or flow of vital force -- within us first, between us second, extended to the matrix of interconnectedness that is the total manifestation of life at least on earth, and beyond that, the field of energy itself from which all form and experience has emerged.

MISHLOVE: You mentioned earlier that the Tantric practices may date back as long ago as 4000 B.C. to the Harappa and Mohenjodaro cultures, where Shiva was depicted sitting in meditation in some of the clay tablets and inscriptions. But there's also the image of the dancing Shiva. Movement and stillness are both embodied in the iconography of Shiva.

CHETANANANDA: And movement and stillness are essential to the manifestation of life. To establish oneself in -- first of all, to be aware of movement, of rhythm, of pulse, within yourself -- say, the rhythm of your breath, and then more subtly the rhythm of the breath within the breath, which as a matter of fact takes place a little bit more than 26,000 times a day, 12 times a minute, regularly, this breath within the breath happens. To be aware of that subtle breath causes us then to become aware of what is called nadi, which is ten levels of vibration that are related to the fluxion of the breath of life within us. And those ten different frequencies of energy are the guide for us to begin to expand our awareness into realms of experience that are not available to ordinary human beings. It is these higher levels of experience from which different kinds of so-called spiritual powers manifest within people. I personally have seen these powers manifest

in very powerful ways, so that I don't have any trouble with it, although some of your audience who want to see some kind of study done on it may be skeptical.

MISHLOVE: One of the terms that's often associated with the Siddha yoga tradition in the United States is shaktipat, or the channeling of the energy of the female goddess Shakti.

CHETANANANDA: Shaktipat actually means descent of grace, or descent of the energy, and it refers to the transmission of spiritual force from teacher to student that releases the accumulated strain and trauma within the student, allowing for, as much as is possible, the expansion of vital force within that person, and in the highest cases the instantaneous, complete realization on the part of the disciple. So shaktipat is a very powerful experience which is essential to the Tantric tradition and is found in no other tradition in India. In that case the touch, the look, the word, or the gesture of the teacher is sufficient to transmit the energy. Now, when we are talking about grasping, or connection or contact with an understanding which totally transcends our individuality and at the same time radically alters our understanding of our self and its dimensions, and at the same time changes our relationship to the whole world and the world of experience, then that's something very, very powerful indeed. And shaktipat has the capacity to instantly transform a person's understanding.

MISHLOVE: That sounds like perhaps one of the highest uses of the kinds of spiritual powers that might manifest through Tantric discipline.

CHETANANANDA: Indeed. There are really two forms of manifestation of this power which are beneficial, and one is healing -- healing the body, healing the mind. So this shaktipat has the capacity, as it releases the first coil of kundalini, which we call the prana kundalini, to bring restored vitality to the physical body, and as it releases the second coil, to bring health and stability to the mind and the emotions, so that the person can become completely calm and totally integrated. In this integration and calmness, then, we are fit and prepared to have a vision of our individuality and its place in the total scheme of life, which isn't very big. Our individuality isn't very big in the total scheme. So then our ego gets finished.

MISHLOVE: Would you say that the goal of Tantric yoga is different than the goals of any other spiritual traditions?

CHETANANANDA: Absolutely not. Only the methodology is different.

MISHLOVE: How would you characterize the goal?

CHETANANANDA: The goal is the complete and total realization of one's own infinite source, the infinite source of life that exists within each of us. To have that experience totally changes your understanding of everything. For instance, say suddenly we realize that all of us are totally interconnected in life, that there's no such thing as an independent person. We start to realize the inputs -- the energetic inputs, the physical inputs; we see where they come from, how dependent we are on them, and how the changes in those inputs affect the total manifestation of our personality and our behavior and our action and its effect in the world. Suddenly then we have to be a lot more respectful of the other, when we realize that the degree to which we are all interconnected may in fact destroy any real meaning that there might exist to the term "other." There is in fact perhaps only one thing, and that is life itself, manifesting in the form of each of us individually. Well, that means diversity is not a dangerous thing. Diversity is a fabulous thing upon which all manifest life is dependent, and something which, instead of being afraid of or rejecting, we should embrace and promote. That's just a simple thing. Then we go on to begin to see diversity as one of the manifestations of the infinite creativity embedded in life, and we start to have an amazing respect for life itself -- a respect that is not based on individuality, or this body, because bodies come and go all the time, but rather on that fundamental power. Turning our attention to that power, and beginning to become attuned to that, to the degree that our awareness of it expands tremendously, brings, first of all, a fullness within us. Our hearts are full; we feel terrific all the time, no matter what circumstances we face in life, because we understand exactly what circumstances are, and that is ever-changing. The second thing we are able to do is bring this sense of fullness to all the lives who our life touches. All the lives that we touch we are filling up, and this transformation reaches out very, very far to bring benefit to many people.

MISHLOVE: It sounds as if you're saying that the goal of this path is easily attained, and that one then spends a lot of time sharing it.

CHETANANANDA: Well, I wish that were true. It is a very simple goal. Perhaps it's not so easy. And the reason for that is, Jeffrey, that we are born into this world basically traumatized. We carry within us the genetic record of the accumulated trauma of our ancestors. We have the biological program embedded, that we are a function of, which is "Eat and reproduce. Compete for resources." And we have, as a function of that biological program, all the instincts that develop within us based upon the feedback that we have gotten -- positive and traumatic feedback -- that informs us of the kind of person we are, the place we have in society, the limitations that we are primarily, according to society, composed of. So when you start to do this practice, at a certain point you are literally going to change the vibration that you carry within yourself. The vibration that exists within your nervous system is going to change. All of your instincts are going to shift, and your system, which has spent a lot of time accumulating that trauma and learning to protect itself, adapting and compensating from the various difficulties that it has faced, is going to squawk like crazy when you try to bring this mechanism to a total point of stillness. It's going to complain. And at the same time -- there are two things that happen. One is that to reach that point of stillness you have to have accumulated some expansion of creative energy within you, so you become automatically a little bit stronger, maybe a lot stronger person. And as you're working and working and working, breaking down blocks and tensions, becoming stronger and moving toward this point of stillness, you have many opportunities which come your way. Suddenly you are attractive to people that you were never attractive to before. People seek you out because that vitality is also known as charisma. And opportunities for everything happen -- business, for relationships, everything. And whatever it is that you previously imagined that you were lacking in your life, that was going to make life wonderful for you, will suddenly be knocking at your doorstep. And if you identify with whatever it is that presents itself, then the loss of energy that takes place brings you back to a lower level in your . So it's not so easy to get this mechanism to change.

MISHLOVE: What you're saying seems consistent with what I've often heard about Tantra, which is that it can be a very rapid path towards enlightenment, but also fraught with danger.

CHETANANANDA: Indeed that's true. It is dangerous because if you are serious about spiritual growth -- it's only dangerous in this sense. If you really want to grow spiritually, then Tantra is dangerous, the Tantric sadhana is dangerous, because you are going to become powerful and face the opportunity for endless distraction. And if you embrace any of that distraction, then your sadhana is lost, and your opportunity to achieve the highest state may be also missed.

MISHLOVE: So there's a very fine balance that's required.

CHETANANANDA: It is a fine balance and a fine sensitivity that should evolve within a person who pursues this practice. It is a fine sensitivity in the sense that since this is in no way life-denying -- you'll notice that in some Indian traditions the world is considered polluted and a source of evil. The Tantric tradition doesn't even relate to that. Basically you hear that and you kind of chuckle, because the world, all experience, arises from the same fundamental source that purity, the highest experience, arises from. It's all one thing, so dealing with the world and living in the world is fundamental to Tantric sadhana. Then secondly --

MISHLOVE: We're out of time. That's a great note to end on. I appreciate it very much. Swami Chetanananda, thank you so much for being with me.

CHETANANANDA: Jeffrey, I'm really happy to be with you. Thank you for having me.